

# Response to the consultation on the National Equity of Access Plan 2022- 2026

# On the updating of the National Equity of Access Plan 2022 – 2026 by the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Further, Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science

## Introduction

The Royal Irish Academy welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (D/FHERIS) on the development of the next National Access Plan that will run from 2022 to 2026.

The Academy is strongly supportive of the HEA and D/FHERIS commitment to the delivery of an equitable and inclusive higher education system. Higher education is correctly recognised for the transformative and beneficial impact it can have upon the individuals who participate in it as students and staff and for the local communities, region, economy and society within which it is situated.

The Academy welcomes and notes the positive developments arising from the implementation of the previous iteration of the National Equity of Access plan. In particular it notes the following:

- Positive trends in participation by students with disabilities and the successful meeting of targets to grow participation rates of students with specific disabilities
- Provision of specified funding such as the Fund for Students with Disabilities recognising the additional financial burden borne by many students with disabilities, and the Student Assistance Fund, to support students experiencing unexpected financial difficulties during their studies
- A dedicated infrastructure within higher education institutions in the development of a network of Access Offices focused upon growing participation rates of under-represented cohorts
- Enhanced approaches to data collection to support evidence-based policy making.

The learning and advances created through the emergency shift to online delivery of T&L during the pandemic and the accompanying investment in digital infrastructure should be consolidated and built upon in support of wider equity of access objectives. The impact of the pandemic upon higher education practice has had immediate obvious effects upon both the delivery and accessibility of higher education for students in terms of the switch to online learning and the inaccessibility of campuses for many student cohorts since March 2020. The likely longer-term impact upon participation and attainment rates is more complex and somewhat unknown: however, the HEIs have already moved to enhance their provision of student support services to help students transition back to full-time campus education and to reconcile and move forward positively from their own experiences of pandemic life. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of external national infrastructures in enabling participation, for example, during the pandemic access to suitable technology and high quality, reliable broadband became *de facto* core infrastructures supporting student participation in online T&L.

The consultation paper notes that the current target to grow the participation rates of mature students is as yet unmet. The opportunities created through online teaching and learning to facilitate participation by students beyond the traditional school leaver cohort should be carefully considered in the development of the next national access plan. Ireland's future national ambitions require a highly qualified workforce and population with access to ongoing opportunities to upskill and enhance their personal development to respond to the opportunities and challenges presented by for example, the roll-out and take up of new technologies, or the development of response to global climate action challenges. Access to differentiated lifelong learning will be key to this. As well as those mature students entering higher education for the first time, those already in the workforce with higher education qualifications will require access to flexible provision of upskilling programmes. Consideration could be given to the expansion of HEAR/DARE to post-graduate programmes.

The consultation paper indicates that the next iteration of the national equity of access plan will seek to:

- Grow the number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds given the opportunity to participate in high-prestige professional undergraduate and post-graduate courses (e.g. medicine)
- Grow the participation of mature students
- Be informed by the student voice and experience in developing and delivering effective and inclusive supports within HE.

The Academy would like to state its support for these objectives.

The Academy also wishes to indicate its support for a continued emphasis upon improving the HE participation rates of Irish travellers and students from other minority racial or ethnic backgrounds. The Academy notes the potential for the next action plan to support research with the objective of better understanding the experiences of students from minority racial and ethnic backgrounds, and to draw upon this research-generated insights to inform targeted, appropriate, and valid supports. The Academy considers that the next iteration of the strategy should look to identify the factors that support student retention in higher education more generally. Recent research by the ESRI examined how Irish HEIs compare in their student retention patterns, taking account of student characteristics such as prior academic performance. It found clear institutional differences reflective of the differences in the type of students enrolling in particular HEIs. However, it also found that some colleges with more disadvantaged intakes fare better, all else being equal, pointing to the role of academic supports, differentiated T&L approaches, as well as student engagement in college life in promoting success (McCoy and Byrne, 2017<sup>1</sup>).

The Academy considers that the next iteration of the strategy could usefully specify actions to support the participation of students with autism and similar neurodevelopmental conditions who would benefit from targeted supports to enable their participation in higher education. There has been a significant growth in the number of primary and post-primary age-students with autism and the number of HE level students with these conditions may also rise significantly in the years ahead. Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) already make up 7.5% of all new entrants into higher education (AHEAD, 2019<sup>2</sup>). There is an emerging body of Irish research (see Coleman, Cummins and O'Donovan, 2020<sup>3</sup>; Doyle et al, 2017<sup>4</sup>) that can be usefully drawn upon to inform the Strategy's actions to support access, participation and retention of students with autism including evidence of the importance of:

- Pre-transition programmes to help prepare students on the spectrum with the transition from post-primary to higher education

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<sup>1</sup> McCoy, S and Byrne, D (2017), Student Retention in Higher Education, in J. Cullinan, D. Flannery (eds.), *Economic Insights on Higher Education Policy in Ireland*

<sup>2</sup> AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability) (2019) Numbers of students with disabilities studying in Higher Education in Ireland 2017/18. Dublin; AHEAD Educational Press

<sup>3</sup> Colman, L., Cummins, A., O'Donovan, J. (2020) Gaining Insight into Transition and Progression of Students on the Autism Spectrum - DISCOVER a Transition Programme with a Difference. The Ahead Journal, [online] Volume 11. Available at: <https://www.ahead.ie/journal/Gaining-insight-into-transition-andprogression-of-students-on-the-autism-spectrum-Discover-a-transition-programme-with-a-difference>.

<sup>4</sup> Doyle, A. Gleeson, C. and Treanor, D. (2017) 'A pre-college transition programme for students with Autism 6 / 8 Spectrum Disorder in Ireland' in AHEAD Journal issue 5.

- Multi-domain supports - socialisation, educational, and independent living –recognising that many students on the spectrum will need support across all three domains
- Involving students with autism in the design and delivery of inclusive supports and an inclusive educational environment (Coleman, Cummins and O’Donovan, 2020).

Consideration should also be given to the specific inclusion of ‘university of sanctuary students’ in national access supports.

Employers and industry also have a role to play in support of equity of participation and attainment by making a special effort to engage with under-represented student cohorts in higher education through the provision of opportunities to take up paid work placements to help build students work preparedness and introduce them to new career opportunities in support of greater equity of attainment amongst student cohorts and ultimately greater diversity in the workforce. The next iteration of the strategy could usefully work with employers and employers organisations to identify successful exemplars in such initiatives that could be mainstreamed.

The Academy looks forward to engaging with the Department of FHERIS and the HEA on these issues. The Academy’s Higher Education Futures Taskforce<sup>5</sup> will report in September 2021 and its work will include a specific paper upon building equality, inclusiveness and diversity in Ireland’s future higher education system.

### **About the Royal Irish Academy**

The Academy promotes and supports excellence in scholarship across the sciences, humanities and social sciences. It is an independent, self-governing body of Ireland’s most distinguished and internationally renowned scholars and scientists. The Academy encourages and facilitates scholarly informed debate and discussion on issues of public interest in line with its members’ expertise. The Academy’s submission may be published by the HEA. For more information on this submission please contact the Royal Irish Academy Head of Policy and International Relations, Sinéad Riordan, [policy@ria.ie](mailto:policy@ria.ie)

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the work of the RIA Higher Education Future Taskforce please visit <https://www.ria.ie/policy-international/working-groups/higher-education-futures>